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SUBJECT: TAJIK GOVERNMENT-WESTERN NGO ROUNDTABLE: ATTENDANCE HIGH,
EXPECTATIONS RESTRAINED

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

1. (SBU) What looked like a routine meeting was a small breakthrough for Tajikistan's development community. The December 2 roundtable discussion of donors, NGOs and government was the first time all three groups came together on any subject, let alone the sensitive issues of NGO intentions, registration and visa issuance. The dialogue remained relatively benign and predictable but the event demonstrated a good faith effort on the part of the Tajik government, sending eight representatives including Deputy Minister of Justice Rustam Mengliyev, and showed the Tajiks that a united front of donors and the NGO community expect more transparent, consistent visa and registration procedures.

2. (SBU) The turnout for the event was exceptional, with an overflow crowd that could not be accommodated with enough headsets for translation. Government turnout was gratifyingly strong. As expected, the government held the party line about visa issuances, repeating that the normal time frame was 14-30 days, but technical difficulties (read: sloppy paperwork) can lead to longer waits. Despite having an open floor and myriad individual complaints about the visas process, the NGOs kept relatively quiet on the visa front. Only the EU representative pressed the consular representative about the inconsistent issuances for EU consultants and NGO workers. Bakhram Kholnozarov, consular department head, demurred, claiming that Tajik law dictated visa policy but they followed those regulations precisely. Later, the Tajiks admitted there were some "negative cases," referring obliquely to the politically charged cases like NDI which have dragged on for months.

3. (SBU) NDI seized the opportunity to make their case publicly when the discussion turned to registration. NDI Country Director Gegham Sargsyan asked why designated Ministry of Justice (MoJ) points of contact had refused their calls. Mengliyev acted surprised and said his door was always open when issues arose. The Director would not back down until he had a fairly firm assurance of a meeting with a decisionmaker. Other NGOs reported successfully re-registering within one month. The MoJ reviewed the laws that required many NGOs to re-register, and acknowledged that there were at times conflicting regulations and requirements. The Tajiks would not comment on the draft law that would require all NGOs to re-register (based on the similar Russian draft law), although ABA/CEELI raised the question. Another Tajik official from the Presidency's Aid Coordination Unit (ACU) agreed that the NGOS reporting requirements to the government could be streamlined.

4. (SBU) More than 60 people crowded the UN conference room for the 90-minute discussion. On the Tajik side, four representatives from the MFA, including the head and deputy of the consular sections, Deputy Minister of Justice Rustam Mengliyev, representatives of the Ministry of Customs and State Revenues and ACU. From the donors, the EU, UN, British, French and German Embassies attended, as did a large number of USAID and State Embassy officers. Dushanbe's NGO forum, a representative body of 40 international NGOs turned out in force, and their Chairman, Mercy Corps Director Gary Burniske, gave introductory comments highlighting the role of NGOs and the significant and varied projects they carried out, both humanitarian and developmental across all sectors. Meg Luckins, project team leader for the British-funded Supporting the Development of Third Party Arbitration Courts moderated the

discussion and skillfully drew the Tajik participants into the discussion without backing them into a corner.

5. (SBU) Although some non-Tajik participants privately expressed frustration about the futility of such a meeting, many NGOs were grateful to come to the table with the government for the first time. At the conclusion, the government agreed to coordinate with the NGO forum to form two working groups to address visa issues and registration procedures. There was also some time after the meeting for individual NGOs to work their issues "offline."

16. (SBU) COMMENT: In a country where government officials regularly dodge phone calls and avoid meetings, having officials available to answer unscripted questions was a gratifying step forward. No one could expect the government to admit to willful delays on visas or intentional interference on registration, no matter what the truth behind the recent problems. Whether or not the pledges of cooperation, communication, and open doors were sincere, several well-connected government officials made such offers in front of a large audience, and Post intends to work to hold them to their word. However, convincing the leadership of NGOs' good intentions for Tajikistan remains an ongoing challenge for all donors. When queried about the meeting several days later, North America desk officer Nasredinov said it was a good step forward for a first meeting, and he encouraged further working group interaction.

17. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: As pleased as we were with this meeting, we know smoothing the path for Western NGOs in Tajikistan will be an uphill battle. The Ministry of Security, in cahoots with hard-line, anti-Western Russian intelligence advisers, is determined to limit the Western presence and influence in Tajikistan to the greatest extent possible. At the same time, we have reformists in the various parts of the government who are rooting for the West and doing what they can to help. In fact, the idea for this roundtable came from one of the best young reformers. Atop it all sits President Rahmonov whom we still believe is generally a reformer at heart, but who has to work hard not to fall off his high-wire while he tries to keep both the Kremlin and the West relatively satisfied. END COMMENT.
HOAGLAND

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